13 The physical environment of Washo territory is marked by its variety of terrain, climate, flora, and fauna, primarily due to variations in altitude 133 within a comparatively small area. The Sierra Nevada rises gradually to the east of the central valley of California from near sea level to peaks over 10,000 feet in altitude, then it drops abruptly on the eastern slope to about 361 5,000 feet. Generally the Washo lived at 4,500 to 5,500 feet in the valleys 133 east of the Sierra Nevada; around 5,500 to 7,500 in the highlands; and their treks took them down to 3,000 feet on the west side of the Sierra. This gave them a wide range of habitats in mountain-valley terrain.

132 The highlands and western slopes had yellow pine, fir, and hemlock [137] vegetation; a transitional and boreal life zone; humid mesothermal and microthermal climates; and zones receiving between 10 to 60 inches of annual precipitation. In the mountains the summers are warm, with rains through July. Snows start in November, followed by cold weather with freezing nights until April.

[137] In the lowlands to the east of the Sierra Nevada the Washo had pinon and juniper vegetation, an upper sonoran life zone, and an arid-cold-steppe [241] climate (Elsasser 1960, 3-6). These areas have 100-140 days of growing season and all farming requires irrigation (Department of Economic Development n.d.). The weather station at Minden, Nevada is 4,730 feet above sea level. It has recorded an annual precipitation of 8.73 inches, an average growing season of 144 days from May 29 to September 20, a high maximum temperature of 109° F. and a low maximum of -24° F.

Throughout Washo territory the average variability of annual precipitation is around 20-25%. In the months of December through February 60-70% of possible sunshine is received and the figure is 80-90% in the months of June through August.

433 The mountains and lakes (especially Lake Tahoe), the high percentage of [457] sunny days, and legalized gambling in Nevada make tourism the major industry [233] in Washo territory today. Cattle raising and dairying are the most important [234] agrarian industries. Lumbering and mining are of minor importance (Department of Economic Development n.d.).

[313] Compared with other tribes in the Great Basin the Washo occupied a very [36] abundant environment. Hamilton described the Truckee River country in 1844 [16] as "a hunter's paradise, with the streams full of fish and blue grouse in every [13] direction" (Sieber 1951, 162). This abundance is reflected in the fact that the Washo had a higher population density than any other Great Basin tribe. Kroeber (1947, 137) gives a figure for the Washo that comes out as 2.4 square miles per person. The average population density for all of the Great Basin was roughly 15 square miles per person (Steward 1938, 46).

INTRODUCTION

Like many other Great Basin peoples the Washo have been unevenly studied by professional anthropologists. A common theme that runs through much of the early written comment, and into the ethnographic literature of the first few decades of this century, is the anticipation of their imminent extinction. In the very earliest accounts of mountain men and travelers they were frequently mistaken for Paiutes, and in the reports of the Indian agents of the 1850's and 60's they were seldom considered worthy of mention except as an extremely depressed and dependent group in the process of dying out or being absorbed by their more aggressive neighbors.

Population figures reported during the 19th century were highly contradictory and misleading, for they failed to take into account the extreme mobility of the Washo, and the dispersed character of settlement pattern even during the winter months. Furthermore, the Indian agents were concerned primarily with those peoples within their areas of jurisdiction who presented well defined administrative and political problems to the government in the protection of the interests of American migrants and settlers. The Washo offered minimal resistance to the intruders. They were never sufficiently organized to make effective demands in their own behalf, and within a very few years of contact part of the population had established itself in semi-sedentary dependent colonies around white settlements. It was groups of this sort -- particularly in the vicinity of major white settlements in the Carson and Truckee valleys -- that were identified as "The Washo tribe" in early reports. Little or nothing was known of actual territorial distribution of the people, and agents were ignorant of many bands that maintained some degree of autonomy and isolation.

Another factor of importance in defining the status of the Washo as a group is the placement of their territory in relation to westward American expansion. The core of this territory is made up of a chain of fertile valleys on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevadas from Antelope Valley in the south to Honey Lake in the north. The abundance of water, fish, small game, edible plants and seeds made this a relatively rich region for hunters and gatherers. The extensive growth of pinenut trees on the mountains forming the eastern boundaries of their territory and the availability of acorns on the western slope of the Sierras provided large harvests of staple seeds. Large game was also plentiful in the mountains.

The attractiveness of this region, and its potentialities for farming and grazing, were noted by the first travelers who passed through it to California after enduring the arduous trek across the dry expanse of the

WASHO PREHISTORY: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH

by John A. Price

Anthropological research dealing with the Washo Indians and their aboriginal territory has produced a considerable body of descriptive data, much of it amassed in the past decade. This paper will review that portion of the data pertaining to prehistory in Washo territory. [1]

Washo territory in the middle 1800's centered on Lake Tahoe in California and Nevada and the areas immediately to the north, east and south. Except for occasional wider ranging for gathering or trade, Washo territory extended from the south shore of Honey Lake south to Sonora Pass and the West Walker River in California. East to west their territory extended from the Pinenut Mountains in Nevada to several miles west of the main crest of the Sierra Nevada in California.

The physical environment of Washo territory is marked by its variety of climate, flora and fauna resulting from the variations in altitude which occur within a comparatively small area. The Sierra Nevada, a great tilted block, rises gradually to the east of the central valley of California from near sea level to peaks over 10,000 ft. in altitude and drops abruptly on its eastern slope in Nevada to around 5,000 ft. in elevation.

The Washo territory is characterized by yellow pine and fir vegetation in the highlands and by pinyon and juniper in the lowlands, ranging through Boreal, Transitional and Upper Sonoran life zones. A humid microthermal climate with 20 to 35 in. of precipitation annually obtains in the mountains while an arid cold-steppe climate is found in the low valleys. In the mountains the summers are warm with rains through July, snows starting in November, and cold weather with freezing nights until April. Snow often reaches more than 15 ft. in depth in some places in the mountains.

There are several estimates of Washo population. Fairfield (1916, 13-14) wrote that "In 1859 Major Dodge, the Indian Agent, reported that they number about 900"; Kroeber (1925, 944) estimated around 1500 for A.D. 1770; Lowie (1939, 301) wrote that "recent figures indicate approximately 300"; and Merriam and d'Azevedo (1957, 615) wrote that "Present population is variously reported at between 400 and 1000 individuals; the figures on file at the Nevada Indian Agency in Stewart, Nevada, support the larger estimates."

[1] [for an additional note regarding the preparation of this paper, see p. 92 -- Analyst]